

Texican would have to fight off more than ten enemy soldiers. Tall odds.

But the men of the Alamo knew it was time to stand and fight. As a strategic asset, the Alamo was better than nothing. That's because the Texicans had nothing else in place to slow Santa Anna's advance toward the eastern settlements where talk of independence had taken hold.

If Texicans didn't stop him at the Alamo, Santa Anna could very well have carved a path of destruction across the state that effectively deprived its people of the means to resist and the will to continue their struggle for Independence. Had Santa Anna made his way across Texas, there might not have been anything left to fight for.

The upshot is that conquering the Alamo appealed to Santa Anna's ego even though it did little to accomplish his military objective of suppressing the Texas Revolution. He needed to eradicate the passion for independence within every Texican, not simply defeat an army in the field.

Viewed in that light, taking the Alamo was for him an indulgence not a military necessity. He fancied himself as the Napoleon-of-the-west and he dreamed of decisive battles to elevate his standing.

And if Santa Anna had simply swept by the Alamo and pushed on to the settled fertile valleys and ranches further east, he'd have preserved the strength of his force. And if he didn't ultimately succeed in ending the dream of an independent Texas, he'd have extracted a far higher price from the Texicans he fought. So, even though all hands were lost at the Alamo, their sacrifice saved other lives that would have been lost beating back an unwounded Mexican Army of Operation.

Santa Anna himself was a dangerous and daring adversary. He wasn't anyone to be taken lightly. He'd fought his way to the top of the Mexican military through a series of wars, including the fight for independence from Spain. Santa Anna knew a thing or two about fighting. He was a charismatic and compelling leader who issued orders that he knew would be obeyed. His army was disciplined and far better equipped than any comparable units then fighting for Texas.

But we're taught that pride comes before the fall, and Santa Anna's pride was his Achilles'heel. Santa Anna did not begin his campaign with respect for his opponents. He considered the Texicans fighting for Independence as an ill-disciplined rabble that would be defeated by the first whiff of grapeshot that he sent over their heads.

Before he marched north to Texas, Santa Anna even boasted to a group of visiting Frenchmen and Englishmen that defeating Texas was just the first step in his plans for North America. He actually said he'd conquer the U.S., haul down the Stars and Stripes and hoist the Mexican flag over this very building: The Capitol. Well, that's quite a boast, and I know what ol' Sam Houston must have said when he heard about it:

"That'll be the day. He'll have his hands full right here in Texas." And so he did.

Eventually, Santa Anna did learn to respect Texas, but a lot of men had to die first.

And sitting here today, we ask ourselves: Why did they die? What were they fighting for? And is the country around us today worthy of their sacrifice? Some questions we can answer. Some will be answered for us.

They weren't eager to die. They wanted to live out their years in a free Texas. Time and again, Alamo commander William Travis appealed for reinforcements and only once did 30 men answer the call by riding through the Mexican lines to join their fellow Texicans.

In his famous letter to "the People of Texas and all Americans in the World", that he wrote with the Alamo surrounded and Santa Anna gathering strength, Travis made a last appeal for additional defenders.

This is what he told Texas:

"The enemy has demanded a surrender at discretion, otherwise, the garrison are to be put to the sword if the fort is taken. I have answered the demand with a cannon shot and our flag still waves proudly from the walls. I shall never surrender or retreat. I call on you in the name of Liberty, of patriotism and every thing dear to the American character, to come to our aid with all dispatch. If this call is neglected, I am determined to sustain myself as long as possible and die like a soldier who never forgets what is due his own honor and that of his country. Victory or Death."

The men at the Alamo died because they believed that some things are more important than life itself. They knew that faith, family, and freedom were worth fighting for. And they also knew that, if they had to live without true independence, their lives wouldn't be worth living.

They wanted the protections of a legitimate Constitution. They wanted their individual rights to be honored. They believed in the idea of self-government. They insisted that government respect their right to own private property. They chafed under tariffs and demanded free trade. They fought for democracy as the surest path to freedom.

And it's true that the issue of slavery motivated some of the men at the Alamo. We must acknowledge that some of the men at the Alamo owned slaves and they were fighting for the right to keep them. History proved them wrong on that point. And that painful truth should not diminish the greater principles that all of the Texicans at the Alamo fought for. Just as our Founders did great things despite their flaws, so too did the Alamo's defenders ennoble themselves by the way they ended their lives.

The most dramatic moment was still yet to come. It happened when William Travis gathered his command in the courtyard of the Alamo and leveled with his men about the fix they were in. They had three options, he told them.

They could surrender, but they had all seen the red flag Santa Anna had flown. It meant no quarter. They would all be executed.

They could make a break for it and try to fight their way through the Mexican lines. But this option was also doomed to failure because they would be fleeing across open country and Santa Anna's cavalry would butcher them easily.

And they could instead defend the Alamo and, by dying in place, inflict enough casualties on the Mexicans to weaken Santa Anna's army. Travis chose the hard path.

"My own choice is to stay in this fort, and die for my country, fighting as long as breath shall remain in my body. This I will do even if you leave me alone," Travis said. But the choice was up to each of them, he said. Then he used his sword to draw a line across the courtyard.

"I now want every man who is determined to stay here and die with me to come across this line. Who shall be the first?"

And one by one, the men who died at the Alamo all came across.

Now, some people will tell you that Travis' last speech was fiction. They'll say it's melodramatic and too full of grand gestures. They'll say it's wishful thinking on the part of dreamers and romantics. But I believe that Travis did draw that line in the sand.

If you read his letters and consider the convictions of those men holed up with him in the Alamo, I believe you'll come to the same conclusion. Travis knew exactly what he was doing and his men knew their precise and painful destiny. And they stepped across that line in the sand and stayed just the same. Because independence is worth it.

And that's why men rode off from their families to join a motley band of committed patriots, who without training, without supplies, and without much hope for success gambled everything on God and Texas.

And they won even as they spent their lives so dearly on the walls of the Alamo.

And the debate goes on today. Some men don't believe that any principle or conviction is worth the political capital to draw a line in the sand. But other men still do. And it's with those like-minded men and women that I'll throw in my lot.

Some things are still worth fighting for, and we'd better never forget it. Because if enough of us ever do forget, we'll have squandered our birthright to freedom and we'll be the unworthy beneficiaries of those proud Americans who came before us.

The Alamo's defenders, like our Founding Fathers before them, gave everything to put unstoppable events in motion. Their deaths were the birth pains of greatness.

"Victory or Death," became Victory in Death. And that victory was the offspring of the courage needed to make the simple yet difficult choices that so often determine history. May we never forget that freedom demands sacrifice. God bless the men who died at the Alamo. And God bless America.

CITIZENS FROM THE 9TH DISTRICT OF TEXAS

HON. NICK LAMPSON

OF TEXAS

IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Wednesday, March 7, 2001

Mr. LAMPSON. Mr. Speaker, I rise today to honor local citizens from the 9th District of Texas who were chosen during Black History Month for their work. While the dedication of African-American leaders is well-known throughout the United States, local citizens, right here in the Southeast Gulf Coast region, are just as important to ensuring equal rights for all Texans. Last month I asked members of the communities in the 9th District to nominate individuals for my "Unsung Heroes" award that gives special recognition to those unsung heroes, willing workers, and individuals who are so much a part of our nation's rich history. Recipients were chosen because they embodied a giving and sharing spirit, and had made a contribution to our nation.

These individuals have not only talked the talk, but they have walked the walk. They have worked long and hard for equal rights in their churches, schools, and in their communities. While their efforts may not make the